Content Warnings and Censorship

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abstract: Applying a content warning to metadata and archival descriptions is a practice that libraries increasingly embrace, even though the American Library Association considers content labeling to be censorship under the Library Bill of Rights. The language used in a content warning, such as *offensive* or *harmful*, carries important implications for the responsibility the library assumes and the actions it might take. Before deciding to apply a content warning, libraries should consider a range of questions posed by such warnings and be prepared to respond to the inherent conflict they create with librarianship's commitment to intellectual freedom and anti-censorship.

Introduction

American society regularly acts out one of its moral panics through a desire to ban library books. Such prohibitions may feel increasingly quaint in the Internet era, but censorship of libraries has become a predictable symbolic front on which cultural and political battles are waged. Library censorship is not a trivial issue because it is closely related to free speech, which is protected by the First Amendment in the United States and is deeply ingrained in America's culture.

The field of librarianship has developed strong cultural and professional bulwarks against censorship. Librarians have historically been proud to embrace the aphorism that a good library collection will contain something to offend everyone.[1] Unfortunately, librarians are sometimes among those who claim they are offended and, as a result, react by taking censorious actions. Applying a content warning (or label) is a practice that libraries have increasingly embraced, even though it is closely related to censorship or even an act of censorship itself. A content warning is one type of content label and is analogous to a trigger warning in

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the classroom. Under the professional values of librarianship as described in "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," prejudicial content labels are condemned as "the censor's tool."[2] Any defense of content warnings should be able to respond to the inherent conflict they create with the profession's commitment to intellectual freedom and anti-censorship.

Offensive speech is protected under the First Amendment, including speech that creates "grief, anger, or fear" in the hearer.[3] Even hate speech is protected in most cases.[4] In addition to legal protections, our culture places value on free speech, and that value underpins librarianship's opposition to censorship. But we live in a day when calls for limiting free speech are common. Libraries are vulnerable targets at such a time, as they have long been. As the library philosopher Arthur Broadfield wrote in 1949, "The library exists for the sake of freedom of thought. But no sooner has this principle been enunciated than it runs into complex theoretical and practical difficulties placed in its way by a world whose propensities are authoritarian."[5]

The library profession in America expresses its persistent core values through the American Library Association (ALA). Among those values, intellectual freedom stands at the top. Intellectual freedom became foundational to the profession in the 1930s and was codified through the ALA's adoption of the Library Bill of Rights (1939), Code of Ethics (1939), and Freedom to Read Statement (1953), and by the establishment of the Committee on Intellectual Freedom (1940) and later the Office of Intellectual Freedom (1967).[6] Five of the six articles in the Library Bill of Rights pertain to intellectual freedom and censorship. Intellectual freedom is a right held by the reader that the library defends and upholds. Simply put, it means that the library itself takes no moral or political position regarding the ideas expressed within its collections or what books a reader chooses to read.

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These ALA statements are supplemented by interpretations that address specific applications and are designed to support librarians against pressures to restrict intellectual freedom. For example, in 1951 the New Jersey chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution sought to label books in the library that "advocate or favor communism." In response, the ALA Council, the library association's governing body, endorsed a resolution by the Committee on Intellectual Freedom against labeling.[7] In 2015, the ALA Council approved and published "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,"[8] one of five interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights that make up the ALA's Statements and Policies on Censorship.[9] The interpretation distinguishes between viewpoint-neutral labels and labels that are prejudicial:

> Viewpoint-neutral directional labels are a convenience designed to save time. These are different in intent from attempts to prejudice, discourage, or encourage users to access particular library resources or to restrict access to library resources. Labeling as an attempt to prejudice attitudes is a censor's tool. The American Library Association opposes labeling as a means of predisposing people's attitudes toward library resources

> . . . Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or themes of the resource, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the resource, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users . . . Prejudicial labeling systems assume that the libraries have the institutional wisdom to determine what is appropriate or inappropriate for its users to access.[10]

A "Labeling and Rating Systems Q&A" adds guidance and rationale: "Including notes in the bibliographic record regarding what may be objectionable content assumes all members of the community hold the same values. No one person should take responsibility for judging what is offensive. Such voluntary labeling in bibliographic records and catalogs violates the Library Bill of Rights."[11] The core idea here—that the library is not the reader's moral guardian—is central to the ALA's Freedom to Read Statement. The ALA first adopted the statement in 1953 and has amended and readopted it multiple times since. The Freedom to Read Statement also addresses content labeling:

> We trust Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation, and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe. We do not believe they are prepared to sacrifice their heritage of a free press in order to be "protected" against what others think may be bad for them . . . It is not in the public interest to force a reader to accept the prejudgment of a label characterizing any expression or its author as subversive or dangerous.[12]

The ALA also opposes prejudicial content labels because they inhibit access, which it considers censorship. The association defines *censorship* in its publication *Intellectual Freedom Manual* as "a decision made by a governing authority or its representative(s) to suppress, exclude, expurgate, remove, or restrict public access to a library resource based on a person or group's disapproval of its content or its author/creator."[13] Emily Knox links censorship and intellectual freedom in saying, "At its heart, the practice of censorship is predicated on who gets to decide what certain people or groups should know."[14] Any librarian or archivist creating and applying a content warning on behalf of their institution ("governing authority") does so from a position of power vis-à-vis their readers. Although less true now than it was in 1940, libraries and archives still have power over access to knowledge. Their commitment to intellectual freedom and anti-censorship means that they do not wield that power to prejudice or inhibit access.

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Unsurprisingly, content labels are never advocated for nor adopted under the banner of censorship. Labeling advocates, like would-be book censors, seek to distance themselves from censorship and claim that labeling is not a form of censorship.[15] On the contrary, they argue, labeling, relocation, and removal of books are simply "legitimate, commonsense measures for counteracting the possible harm."[16] In this "commonsense" defense, the labeling advocate asserts that his or her own moral judgment reflects the

social and moral norms that should be held by all right-thinking readers. David Bromwich explains both the impulse to censor and the need to justify it: "Most people (the highly literate are among the worst) believe that what is good for them will be good for others . . . A regime of censorship must claim to derive its authority from settled knowledge and not opinion."[17] Would-be censors also make the case that context does not matter; if the words or images are offensive, how they are used is irrelevant. They are simply taboo and should not be encountered. In all these cases, Conor Friedersdorf says, challengers "failed to distinguish between using nasty words in order to wound, profane, or disparage, and mentioning nasty words in order to teach about the problems they represent."[18] Library-sponsored content warnings similarly justify labels as counteracting possible harm caused by offensive words and upholding self-evidently correct social and moral norms.

From Offense to Harm

Feeling offended is a well-understood and familiar emotion in everyday life. All of us are offended on occasion and know what it means to give offense, even if unintentionally. Offense is a subjective condition of a negative mental state. It may or may not be caused by wrongful conduct on someone's part.[19] Taking offense at library content is a simplified case to analyze because it does not result from a personal interaction or wrongful conduct on the library's part. Given this fact, what would a "potentially offensive" library content warning mean? It is likely shorthand for "we believe this content has some significant likelihood to offend the sensibilities of some of our readers." If a library states (or concedes) that its content is "potentially offensive," the qualifier *potentially* is critical. It makes explicit the subjectivity inherent in whether a given word or idea or its expression is offensive. The qualifier defines a distance between the library and the reader. That distancing serves several purposes that are clarifying and reassuring for the reader. "Potentially offensive" disassociates the values of the institution from the collections it manages and disseminates. It also makes explicit that the library does not claim to know what any given individual will find offensive. Finally, it conveys that any offense taken was not intentional and is not personal. The reader gets to decide what is offensive, but the flip side is that the library will not do anything about it. The library will not remove the "offensive" book because that offense resides in the reader and not the book itself.[20]

Despite the library profession's opposition to content warnings, their use has gone from nonexistent or very rare to widespread in just the past few years.[21] The backstory dates to at least the 1990's, when contextualization of Indigenous archival materials and descriptions became an active topic of discussion.[22] "Protocols for Native American Archival Materials" documented the work of a 2006 meeting of archivists, librarians, museum curators, historians, and anthropologists convened to identify best professional practices for culturally responsive care of these collections. The protocols included guidelines for informing patrons

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about potentially offensive content.[23] Some of these issues discussed in the context of Indigenous collections have subsequently been extended to archival practice in general.[24]

The 2016 American election was a precipitating event that brought ideas originating in critical information studies further into the teaching and practice of librarianship. In 2017, Michelle Caswell, an LIS professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, published an influential paper, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives." The paper was a personal reflection on the impact the election had on her pedagogy.[25] The earliest widely referenced "potentially harmful content" warning was written in 2018 by the Special Collections Research Center at Temple University in Philadelphia (the statement's effective date was June 2019).[26] Princeton University Library in Princeton, New Jersey, formed an "Inclusive Description Working Group" in May 2019,[27] and a number of Princeton archivists coauthored the report "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia," which was published October 2019.[28] Princeton's "Statement on Language in Archival Description" was released in December 2019.[29] In late 2019, Simmons University Library in Boston published a content warning, "A Note on Dated and Potentially Harmful Language."[30] All these documents reference the Temple statement.

The country's "racial reckoning" in 2020 was the second precipitating event that led to widespread adoption of content warnings. All such warnings follow in the footsteps of the 2019 documents.[31] In 2020, two professional associations (the Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section and the Society of American Archivists) introduced into their codes of ethics the concept that metadata were "potentially harmful" or "harmful."[32] It also became common to see *harm* and *violence* in describing library metadata or collections apart from content warnings themselves.[33]

The idea of harmful speech, or words as violence, has roots in the expansion of regulations of hate speech on college campuses in the late 1980's and the concurrent scholarly elaboration of the concept of hate speech.[34] In *Words That Wound* (1993), Mari Matsuda identifies three elements in defining racist speech: a message of racial inferiority; a message directed against a historically repressed group; and a message that is persecutory, hateful, and degrading.[35] She emphasizes the importance of context to understanding what is degrading.[36] To label hate speech as "offensive" is itself offensive and inappropriate. Charles Lawrence also makes that point when he says, "The word offensive is used as if we were speaking of a difference in taste, as if I should learn to be less sensitive to words that 'offend' me. I cannot help but believe that those people who speak of offense . . . do not understand the great difference between offense and injury."[37] The intentionality of interpersonal hate speech is the source of its power to cause psychological harm. Richard Delgado writes, "There can be little doubt that the dignitary affront of racial insults, except perhaps those that are overheard, is intentional and therefore most reprehensible."[38] The problem with analogizing the impact of hate speech to the impact of passively encountered librarian-authored metadata is that the two lie far apart in their likelihood to cause real psychological harm to a person. Offense and harm are not synonymous concepts.

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Both "potentially offensive" and "harmful" reflect assessments that readers may react negatively to words, images, or ideas they encounter in the library. In both cases, the words, images, or ideas have stayed the same over time, while reader and librarian reactions to them have evolved. Thus, content warnings can never be more than the subjective judgment of a library employee at a given time about what may be "offensive" or "harmful." Why are *offensive* and *harmful* so different, then, especially if they are frequently used synonymously? At least part of the answer lies in the words or ideas that inspired the content warning. Historically, the majority of content warnings have been related to sexuality, often words or content judged to be "obscene" or inappropriate for children and thus possibly offensive to some readers, to their parents, or to members of the local community.[39] Some libraries create what are in effect content labels for these materials by segregating them in access-controlled locations.[40] The library metadata or content that now drive library-created content warnings do not belong to the category of profane, vulgar, or obscene words.[41] They are typically descriptive terms for groups of people and related concepts.[42] For example, the University of Nebraska Omaha's Statement on Harmful Materials defines *harmful* as "racial, gender, sexual, religious, and other language and imagery that are offensive by today's standards."[43] This is language whose meaning and moral valence has changed over time. Just as with books judged by someone to be "obscene" or inappropriate, librarians and archivists created those descriptive metadata with the intent to communicate to readers. To enable discovery, librarians used the vocabulary of their day (or sometimes a past day in the case of slow-changing Library of Congress Subject Headings), the language of the resource itself, or both.

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Another important distinction between *offensive* and *harmful* is that the message the library sends by issuing a warning about potentially offensive material differs greatly from the one it sends when it warns about harmful content. A library alerting the reader to harmful metadata or content is claiming a negative impact on the reader. When Yale University Library, as an example, says in its warning: "We acknowledge that our existing description may contain language that is racist, sexist, colonialist, homophobic, or uses other *offensive terms that may cause harm*,"[44] it converts a subjective experience (offense) into an objective impact (harm). The move from *offense* to *harm* shifts responsibility to the library for the negative mental state readers may experience based on their own sensibilities (they took offense) and acknowledges the offense as both real and damaging. "Potentially offensive" sends the message: We remain agnostic as to whether this item causes offense. "Harmful" sends the message: We do have an opinion, which is that we believe these words are, in fact, offensive and, additionally, may be damaging to our readers.

The Idea of Harmful Language

Like offense, harm—including both physical and psychological harm—is a well understood concept in everyday life. What is less well understood, even logically, is what is meant by *harm* when the causes are words or ideas passively encountered in the library. A close analog to the content warning is the trigger warning, which is designed to prevent or minimize psychological distress related to recollection of painful events in a student's or reader's life. To speak of *harm* in trigger—or content—warnings is to use the language of what Bromwich terms "therapeutic culture." A concept like harm has significant power, especially in an academic setting where universities act in loco parentis. Critically, the victim is the ultimate arbiter of harm, and in a therapeutic culture, it is considered distressing to challenge a self-described victim. As Bromwich says, "An argument is refutable. A symptom is not."[45]

Joel Feinberg's research on the concept of harm makes clear that elevated claims about harm are misguided: "Not everything that we dislike or resent, and wish to avoid, is harmful to us." As examples, he lists transitory disappointments and disillusionments, wounded pride, hurt feelings, aroused anger, shocked sensibility, alarm, disgust, and frustration.[46] Any of these emotions could conceivably be a reaction to library metadata. He concludes, however, that only "if the experience is severe, prolonged, or constantly repeated, the mental suffering it causes may become obsessive and incapacitating, and therefore harmful."[47]

The notion that words and ideas can be harmful likely predates even the first recorded book burning in 430 BCE.[48] Prefiguring modern definitions of hate speech, Thomas Aquinas defined "wrongful language" (*iniuria verborum*) as committing one of four types of moral transgression against another person: affront, defamation, tale-bearing, or taunting. As he wrote in his *Summa Theologica*, "Words are not injurious to others as sounds but as signs, and their signification depends on the speaker's inward intention."[49]

In premodern Europe, heretical ideas were seen as a threat to both church and state. The framework used to regulate language was heresy legislation. Debora Shuger explains, "Heresy law provided the basis for most continental systems of press censorship, which principally targeted misliked ideas: mostly, but not exclusively, religious ones. The best-known and most important of such systems was, of course, the Roman Church's index of forbidden books, first promulgated in 1559, and regularly updated thereafter."[50] Defanging heresy underpins the First Amendment's linking of freedom of speech and the press with the free exercise of religion, thus defining censorship as an unlawful exercise of government authority. Aquinas's wrongful speech required intent or carelessness on the part of the speaker in committing a moral transgression against another person. Heresy, on the other hand, can infect a person who simply encounters a forbidden idea. "Harm" in the context of words or ideas likewise implies that they can spread as a contagion.

The belief that harm is caused by ideas passively encountered remains alive and well in modern-era theocratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian societies. The assumption that ideas are harmful and therefore must be controlled is deeply held by those governments and their populations, with the predictable result of diminishing free exchange of ideas in the public sphere. Ideas challenge, and so weaken, the prevailing orthodoxy because they

open channels to question religious or political pieties and authority. That books contain dangerous ideas—with the potential to spread to an ideologically vulnerable population—underlies all book burnings in history. Ariel Dorfman says, "Censors often perceive themselves as protecting the land and its most vulnerable members—women, children, the poor—from corrosion and corruption, paternally sheltering them from scandalous and disturbing emotions and pictures."[51] Under totalitarianism, the state goes beyond censorship to attempt to control the language itself. It defines permissible and impermissible concepts by creating its own newspeak, redefining words so their everyday meanings become eclipsed by official interpretations as defined by the regime.[52] These deformed words and slogans act as levers of social control that those in power use to justify their legitimacy. Using such language signals that one is on the "inside," or at least politically reliable. But a language denuded of its everyday meanings is a language made confusing and ambiguous, useful as a political tool but much less useful for communicating ideas. It is, above all, a language that people can see has been hijacked for political purposes.

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The South African writer J. M. Coetzee discusses Soviet physicist and dissident Valentin Turchin's idea of socially crucial words taking on a double meaning, the "theoretical" official sense and the "practical" sense that more accurately reflects reality.[53] This doubling of meaning seems to be happening to *harm*, which is used by libraries in its theoretical, not practical, meaning. The idea of harmful library metadata is not simply benign hyperbole, however. It has ethical consequences. It goes without saying that much actual harm is suffered in the world every day. When a respected institution in society asserts that the words in its catalog may cause "harm" to its readers, the power of *harm*'s practical meaning is not simply conferred on the new context; rather, it is trivialized when it is transformed into a metaphor. When everything is harmful, nothing is. But the more pertinent problem is that such language weakens libraries' commitment to intellectual freedom. As Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff conclude in their analysis of the censorious impulse behind the idea of words as violence, "Blurring the line between real violence and metaphorical violence is directly challenging the boundary between protected and unprotected speech."[54]

"Harm" and the Impetus to Act

The language that is used in a library content warning (*potentially offensive*, *potentially harmful*, or *harmful*) carries implications for actions the library might take. The impetus to act is raised as the "temperature" of the warning goes up or when the library appears to take institutional responsibility for the "harm" it causes its readers. In the case of content warnings asserting harm, the intent to act can be part of the warning. Such admonitions communicate, "We know we have a big problem, and it will take time to address." The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in *The Archivist's Task Force on Racism: Report to the Archivist*, recommended adding an "advisory notice" to all catalog

search results to "create a space for NARA to share with the public our ultimate goals for reparative description."[55] The banner on NARA's catalog search results that was implemented in 2021 reads "NARA's Statement on Potentially Harmful Content" and links to a full content warning.[56]

What have libraries traditionally done when members of their community reported that they were offended by something in a library's collection? The libraries, importantly, relied on preexisting policy and responded, "Thank you for your inquiry but this library will not remove—or label—material in our collection *because it offends you*." If a reader were to complain today about being "harmed" by library content, could the library so easily give the same response? That is, "Thank you for your inquiry but this library will not remove—or label—materials in our collection *because it harmed you*." That reply becomes harder to make not only because the library has already provided a harmful content warning but also because it sounds bad for a library to harm a reader. While it may be a point of pride for a library to claim its collection contains something to offend everyone, it would be odd indeed for a library to say the same about a collection with something to harm everyone. "Your words offend me" may elicit an apology or a sympathetic "I appreciate that you feel that way." "Your words harm me" not only makes an apology much less optional but also clearly invites a retraction of what was said. That implication of culpability is absent with offense, where the library concedes no such thing. The use of *harm* escalates the content warning by assigning the library agency and responsibility for the negative impact of its metadata and for continuing to disseminate such content.

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Concern about words as harmful leads naturally to the impulse to restrict or access speech. While content warnings are not the same as challenges to books in the library, developing a policy around actions the library will—and will not—take should prompt similar questions. A collection development policy with procedures to address content challenges is important and recommended by the ALA because it supports the library staff in managing challenges.[57] Knox explains the dual purpose of clearly defined policies around intellectual freedom and how to respond to challenges: "To challenge the inclusion of a particular item in library collections, patrons are required to proceed through a series of bureaucratic hoops that collectively mitigate their views regarding the material vis-à-vis the symbolic power of the librarians and other administrators."[58] The policy and its use thus serve to educate both the library's community and the library's workers about the ethics of librarianship. Knox adds, "The analytic nature of these arguments is in direct contrast to the more 'emotional' justifications made by the challengers."[59] She reminds us that nothing in the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* recommends that librarians consider removing or relocating books from their collections.

The library that has already applied a content warning, or invites it as an option, has more impetus to act in response to a complaint rather than simply to educate the challenger. Indiana University's "harmful language statement" offers the opportunity for users to anonymously report offensive language or content: "Reporting offensive content

could result in adding a content warning where users would encounter the reported item."[60] Does this happen after a single complaint? Or only if the librarian agrees with the complaint? In another example, the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) says it is "is committed to working with its partners to assess and update descriptions that are harmful."[61] Even though the DPLA's policy is clear that the holding library will decide what to do with such reports, there is the clear presumption that partner institutions will act.

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Censorship is so anathema in our profession that most of us probably feel confident that our libraries' actual actions, beyond warnings, will be limited to contextualizing metadata and archival descriptions. We assume that libraries will always keep the full historical and cultural record available to readers even when some readers claim they are harmed by it. But it is easy to imagine scenarios that would test this resolve. For example, imagine that an archive holds a collection whose descriptive metadata it has labeled "harmful." If a group associated with the subject of the collection then tells the archive that the materials themselves perpetuate their oppression, thus causing them ongoing harm, and should therefore be made inaccessible to the public, what does the archive do?[62] It has already conceded that the collection or its metadata is harmful. Libraries should be prepared to respond to such challenges related to "harmful" content warnings, independent of the motivation of the challengers or whether they are inside or outside the profession.

Other actions may be prompted when metadata are considered harmful and the scale of the problem is large, as with archival descriptions. Automated, or partially automated, approaches to changing or modifying metadata are then incentivized. Given the scale of the National Archives, automated replacement is one of the tools NARA proposes to use: "Explore the implementation of a find-and-replace feature in DAS [Description and Authority Service] that allows for searches across all descriptions and replacing and/or adding a value."[63] *The Archivist's Task Force* report sets as the expectation that "all recommendations are grounded in the understanding that NARA has a responsibility to eliminate racist language in archival descriptions." The goal also encompasses addressing implied meanings, which are far more subjective and so much less amenable to an automated approach: "By racist language, the ADS [Archival Description Subgroup] means not only explicitly harmful terms, such as racial slurs, but also information that implies and reinforces damaging stereotypes of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color] individuals and communities while valorizing and protecting White people."[64] Computational approaches or techniques aided by artificial intelligence or linked data are likely to be more promising for vocabulary cross-referencing than for semantic meaning that is embedded in outdated descriptions.[67]

While weeding is a topic distinct from content warnings, both can be vehicles for the censorious impulse based on perceived harm. One librarian described her approach to weeding by saying: "Out of respect for all patrons, the library staff hoped that no individual would view the presence of a book in the stacks as a microaggression or

psychological trigger."[68] The question facing the profession is how "equity audits" or "decolonization" of collections will define actions not just in regard to future acquisitions but also for retention of current holdings.[69] In June 2019, the ALA revised "Evaluating Library Collections: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" to include guidance on handling "outdated, offensive, or harmful" content and "offensive or controversial" content creators. The association declared, "Rather than removing these resources, libraries should consider ways to educate users and create context for how those views, opinions, and concepts have changed over time."[70] If we go down the path of weeding library collections to minimize "harm," or to shape collections so they reflect the world we would rather see in the future or what we would prefer the past to have been, it is true that books are unlikely to disappear entirely from the historical record. But such weeding is still censorship. It conflicts with our profession's respect for readers and their intellectual freedom as envisioned in the Library Bill of Rights or the Freedom to Read Statement.

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Several examples outside academic libraries are also instructive. Bias reporting mechanisms at university campuses, which invite concerns based on the concept of speech as violence with the goal to promote inclusion and belonging, can also lead to the impulse to censor. An example was George Washington University's removal of a Chinese-Australian artist's posters in February 2022 based on student complaints. The university later reinstated the display.[71] Some students perceived the posters to prompt physical or verbal violence, and thus to endanger their safety. But their claim should not have been the only factor in considering how to respond. Academic freedom clearly argued in favor of displaying the posters, even if they offended some students. Other examples are the numerous cases of faculty who have had complaints lodged against them related to their speech and whose university administrations subsequently initiated investigations, suspensions, required trainings, and other actions with professional or personal consequences.[72]

Classroom trigger warnings have also been criticized as infringing on academic freedom for reasons similar to the library profession's objections to content labels. An American Association of University Professors (AAUP) report analogized trigger warnings to library content warnings and endorsed the ALA position on prejudicial labeling. The report concluded that trigger warnings in the classroom are "infantilizing and anti-intellectual" and "interfere with faculty academic freedom." It explained, "The classroom is not the appropriate venue to treat PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] . . . Faculty should, of course, be sensitive that such reactions may occur in their classrooms, but they should not be held responsible for them."[73] This question of responsibility for a student's or reader's negative mental state sits at the heart of the difference between offense and harm, and the role that the librarian or teacher plays in whatever negative impact is claimed. The rhetorical escalation from offense to harm (that is, to embracing the idea of speech as violence) substantially complicates any calculation about appropriate actions to take because, as in all these scenarios, it elevates the challenger's case.

Contextualization and Content Warnings

Updating, or contextualizing, metadata is a closely related issue to content warnings and central to their origin story. Updating subject headings has long been a standard library practice, as well as a locus of activism in the profession.[74] While words change naturally in response to altered norms and through linguistic evolution, they live on unchanged in library collections and catalogs. Updating subject headings in the catalog and contextualizing archival descriptions in finding aids or digital collections can support the library's responsibility to enable communication between people over space and time. Ensuring discoverability means that it is our job to enable readers to find materials using the words they know and not force them to use the language of the past, some of which may be offensive but often is just obscure. While prior Library of Congress Subject Headings are still accessible to support discovery through "see" references, archival descriptions are more akin to historical records themselves. Kate Holterhoff describes approaches that archivists have developed in response to the challenge of contextualizing sensitive materials, including "heavy editing" and "richly narrated."[75]

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Image-rich collections, such as digitized yearbooks, are another example of content where extra care is appropriate and reasonable library practices have emerged. Images are inherently more powerful than words on a page and can reflect negatively on living people and the parent institution's reputation. Since these materials have begun to be digitized, libraries have taken a careful approach, often including content warnings.[76] Oliver Batchelor quotes a *USA Today* study of digitized yearbooks: "We found questionable photos virtually everywhere we looked."[77] After a yearbook scandal resulted in the temporary removal of some content from its digital library, Hollins University Library in Roanoke, Virginia, issued what could serve as a model of a balanced three-part content warning: a statement that the materials in the collection may be offensive and why; a disclaimer that the content does not reflect the values of the institution; and an assertion of the importance of preserving the historical record. The library also supplemented the collection with additional contextual content.[78] Indigenous cultural heritage collections are another example where contextualization is appropriate and the practices well-elaborated in the profession, as evidenced by the digital platform Mukurtu, which manages and shares materials from the Indigenous cultural heritage.[79]

A context statement highlighting for readers that the language in the finding aids and archives should be recognized as a product of the time they were created and that they have inherent historical value is not a content warning. The process of contextualization does invite certain risks, however. For example, the archivist ought not usurp the historian's role when adding interpretation to outdated or potentially offensive descriptions, or engage in attempts to "critique the past," as Holterhoff characterizes one possible goal of contextualization.[80] Contextualization that expresses a personal (or institutional)

judgment about language or content could easily be characterized as "prejudicial" because it tells readers either what the archivist thinks or what the reader should think. Holterhoff discusses this tension, and while she supports adding identity tags, she cautions, "Adding digital tags addressing identity politics related to race, class, gender, and religion, beyond the most blatant examples of bigotry, moves the archive away from objective and mimetic documentation of the past and into the realm of subjective editorializing."[81] The archivist might ask: Is my contextualization helping to build an archive that future historians will find optimally useful? Because descriptions themselves have historical value, Kirsten Wright recommends that "what archivists must do is provide context—primarily through descriptive processes, including descriptions of how and why the records were created, how they came to be in the repository." These processes, Wright says, "make clear the historical and policy context in which these words were used. But the records themselves must be left as they are."[82] Here we recall again that while librarian-created metadata may contain painful words, those words do not reflect malice, past or present. The language in library collections may reflect malice, but that in itself documents human history. Evolving scholarship and practice will ultimately guide, and also constrain, individual or institutional decision-making around contextualizing, enhancing, or changing metadata.[83] The emerging best practices recognize the subjectivity of archival descriptions. They identify goals that are within the bounds of reasonable effort and appropriate actions given the mission of the archive.

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"Taxonomic reparations"—that is, making amends for offense caused by a naming or classification system—is a related topic to contextualization. Taxonomic reparations address ideas that are judged to be harmful because of the worldview they represent rather than any specific words necessarily being offensive in themselves.[84] Three U.S. memory institutions that participated in the 2016 Nelson Mandela International Dialogues wrote, "For us, memory work is not just about remembering the past, but about reckoning with it—that is, establishing facts, acknowledging, apologizing, stopping ongoing violence, and repairing the harm that was done through both material and immaterial forms of reparation."[85] This area of metadata remediation is directly concerned with historical interpretation and contextualization. It extends beyond metadata per se: the OCLC report "Reimagine Descriptive Workflows" cites the ALA's 2021 Cataloging Code of Ethics, which "identifies white supremacy as one of the factors that influences cataloging standards and practices."[86] One such problem is characterized as "over-description" by *The Archivist's Task Force* report: the OurDocuments.gov website of materials from U.S. history "uses adulatory and excessive language to document the historical contributions of White, wealthy men."[87] In the Auditing Archival Description for Harmful Language project at Duke University, "aggrandizement" is identified as one of the categories

of harmful language, encompassing such words as *acclaimed*, *celebrated*, and *eminent*. Clearly those words are not harmful in and of themselves; they are considered harmful because of the worldview they represent. "Fixing" this metadata would entail a highly subjective, explicitly political project because its target has moved from harmful words to "harmful" ideas.[88]

The New Content Warnings: On Whose Behalf?

Whether it is appropriate for employees of a library to express their own values through their work is a long-standing debate in American librarianship. Since its emergence in the 1960s, "social responsibility" librarianship, which seeks to promote action regarding the problems of society, has stood in tension with the Library Bill of Rights.[89] The clearly evident passion of librarians who author content warnings reflects a sympathetic identification with a hypothetical harmed, or vulnerable, reader. The urgency and intensity of these content warnings raise the question of whether the offense may be more keenly felt by the librarians than by the readers who experience the metadata or documents in the course of their study or research. Identity-focused terms and ideas, as progressive liberal concerns, may inspire a modern-day librarian's personal feelings of offense more readily than do "obscene" or sexual terms and ideas, which tend to be socially conservative issues.

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A possible complementary motivation is social signaling: the desire to put on the record the librarian's allyship or personal allegiances. A part of the reason for the transition from sparing to more prevalent use of content warnings, as well as the changed nature of the warnings' language, could simply be that "harm" in the context of words-as-violence (or silence-as-violence depending on the circumstance) is currently ideologically fashionable.[90] Librarians may not, in fact, feel that some readers' mental states actually need such protections, but they do wish to signal that the librarians recognize these words or ideas are unacceptable in contemporary society. Not only that, but that they are themselves offended. Stepping back from personal motivation, a content warning could be viewed as a vehicle to express our profession's collective shame and penitence for past racism, colonialism, and sexism as reflected in our catalogs. This is an understandable impulse, because even passively encountering such language can be uncomfortable. But while any individual librarian might feel dismayed at how racist and colonialist our ancestors were, content warnings are, in fact, the library speaking. Adopting such warnings should entail a calculation that recognizes the distinction between personal opinions, professional judgment, and an institutional position.

Anchoring Our Actions in Our Professional Values

An American college or university library inherits—to its great benefit—the core values of its parent institution, higher education, and the country. Prominent among the values shared by the library profession and higher education, and closely related to free speech, is academic freedom, which provides speech protections in the academy. Intellectual freedom, as articulated in the Freedom to Read Statement, is closely aligned with academic freedom. Academic freedom is not only about rights, however; the liberties it protects are accompanied by an ethic of responsibility to the truth-seeking purpose of scholarship and education.[91] Because academic freedom is central to the university's mission, any limitations on it must not hinder the educational purpose. "Protecting" students from ideas with which they disagree, or which offend them, is an example of a limitation on academic freedom. Similarly, academic libraries employing content warnings is a restriction on intellectual freedom. Before implementing a trigger warning or a content warning, librarians, faculty, and other representatives of the university should ask themselves whether it hampers the educational mission.

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The library also inherits the academy's core value of impartiality as the philosophy by which scholars search for new knowledge and train students to do the same. Impartiality is not the same as neutrality.[92] Impartiality reflects a scholar or librarian seeking the best-informed path as guided by their own professional judgment. Librarians, like academic faculty, should model both academic freedom and impartiality for students because it is challenging to remain open to, and to learn from, ideas with which you vehemently disagree or that offend you. It is easier to decide that those ideas harm you and you should be protected from them, but that is fundamentally an anti-academic notion. The way we develop our collections and describe them should always be mindful of what a university is all about, reflecting both academic freedom and librarians' impartiality. There should be no moral vanity in how we present ourselves to readers. The practice of aspiring to impartiality serves as a mental check on an inclination to see our mission as encompassing the moral education of students or other library users.

Libraries also hold a special identity apart from our parent institutions because we share common values with libraries outside academia. Librarianship can take great pride in being a profession that defends and enacts the virtue of tolerance. We aspire to model open-mindedness in service to all our readers so that they may freely explore whatever interests them. As Broadfield wrote in 1948, "To value an opinion which, while not demonstrably false, appears to be so, which arouses dislike, or which cannot be shown to be useful, requires tolerance. All opinion is objectionable to some, therefore tolerance relates to all opinion."[93] Censorship and censoriousness are expressions of intolerance. Even when invoking a higher virtue such

. . . censorious actions presume that our perspective is the only factually or morally correct one.

as social justice, censorious actions presume that our perspective is the only factually or morally correct one. Unlike libraries distancing themselves from reader reactions to "offensive" content in the library, when librarians label words as harmful, we introduce the notion that we should be balancing the value of anti-censorship with the harm that could be inflicted on readers.[94] The value of anti-censorship is made into a relative value instead of an absolute one. But, in attempting to make that calculation, it is impossible to measure the harm side of the equation because it is potential, subjective, and highly variable over time.

As librarians and archivists, we are stewards of the historical record, but we are not ourselves historians (even if we have that training). It is not our job to write, rewrite, or provide our own gloss on history. It is our job to enable others to have direct access to cultural artifacts, so that they can build new knowledge that contributes to future readers' understanding of our world. Like the historian, each individual librarian stands in a long line of professionals before and after us. This position inspires the humility and long-term perspective shared by our two professions, just as the miles of stacks in a research library can arouse epistemic humility in library visitors. The record of intellectual and creative expression is written in its own languages and voices. It is an ahistorical idea to assert that archaic or currently unacceptable terms are impermissible in an absolute sense. Readers using our catalogs, or researchers consulting our archives, will likely understand the historical context and cues in the library's catalog, descriptive metadata, and collections. It is philistine to imply that the books of someone with a "privileged" identity should be discounted independent of any consideration of the knowledge contained in their works. The question of when and how to apply today's moral lens to the historical record should be a nuanced one, and especially so because "the condescension of posterity" is such an easy, and satisfying, stance to assume.[95]

Consideration of a content warning proposed by library workers should follow the same or similar process, and receive similar scrutiny, as would responding to an external request to remove or label library materials. To support the assessment, the library should ask key questions, such as: Is this needed for our readers? Does it undermine our values and our readers' intellectual freedom? What happens to the warnings in the future? Are they regularly reassessed as to their need? Labeling is an action; it is speech in itself. Like trigger warnings, content warnings are reductionist. They flatten and oversimplify. A warning about racist language implicitly reduces a written work to that dimension, when the actual text is likely to be far more complex. Once we have strayed from the ALA's professional guidelines on content labeling, what are our and our successors' guideposts to make decisions about these labels in the future? Some of today's language will also become outdated. Will the warnings gradually cover more and more of our metadata and collections? Ideally, we can reach a consensus in the profession that content warnings should not be added willy-nilly across our metadata or collections "just in case," or because individual librarians desire to actively express their concerns about the language in our catalogs or collections. The risk of real harm, and its nature,

Our profession's position on prejudicial labeling should set a high bar for making the case to apply a content warning.

should be discussed. Our profession's position on prejudicial labeling should set a high bar for making the case to apply a content warning.

Developing an approach that reflects context and the mission of our library or archive is also critical. A blanket content warning on an entire collection, as the National Archives has done, is a prejudicial content label. It carries an additional important message based on its broad-brush approach and its context. Do readers who have arrived at a document in the National Archives through an Internet search understand that the banner content warning is generally applied across the entire database? The database is not an exhibit; it is a compendium of historical records. Encountering a content warning on the Declaration of Independence or Constitution will seem odd to many readers, certainly to non-Americans. They may rightly wonder, "Why is the U.S. government warning me about this? Is there something wrong or false about it?" Or, "Why is America ashamed of its founding documents?" The banner content warning says to readers: "Enter with caution."

A library has a special relationship with its users. Its mission is to sustain that relationship and to cultivate it with more people. When we warn readers about "harmful" content in our libraries, we speak on their behalf, at a distance, about the negative impact a possible personal offense may have on them. The trust and conversation between the library and the reader should reflect the respect of each for the other. A "harmful" content warning steps into the reader's head and so disrespects that reader. Users of the library are endowed with freedom of thought; they have the capacity to encounter even shocking words or ideas without expecting an institution to protect them. In a college or university, we should not presume how a student's identity or personal background might influence their perspective. If the library provides a content warning because it assumes that a student from a Central American country could be "harmed" by seeing the subject heading "illegal alien," that library has failed to respect the student's maturity or their capacity to see the heading as offensive but not destabilizing. Do we really want to encourage our readers to approach our collections with their emotions primed for taking offense or thinking that they have been harmed? If the student were offended enough to complain, that provides an opportunity for a librarian to explain how subject headings work, as well as librarians' role in changing them over time.

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It is condescending to be cautioned about exposure to words and ideas "for your own good." Paternalism is not neutral to the person experiencing it. It can feel belittling or demeaning because adults—especially students—reasonably want to assert their moral independence.[96] Being told before they see something that it is "harmful" does not respect their moral independence. It inserts someone else's moral judgment. The ALA declares, "Prejudicial labeling systems assume that the libraries have the institutional wisdom to determine what is appropriate or inappropriate for its users to access. They presuppose that individuals must be directed in making up their minds about the ideas they examine."[97] Labeling our metadata or collections as "harmful" unfairly impugns the

librarians who came before us. We cannot be good stewards of our collections if each of us prioritizes our individual academic freedom over defense of our readers' intellectual freedom. We do not live up to our shared values if we allow our professional actions to be driven by the emotions that words in our libraries engender in us or we imagine they might engender in our readers. Heightened emotion or moral certainty can beget the impulse to censor or to request censorship. And it is always harder to stand on principle and resist censoriousness when you or your ideological compatriots believe it is the right thing to do.

The ALA's position on censorship reflects the near-absolutist position on free speech in the U.S. Bill of Rights, which is shared by few countries in the world, past or present. Content warnings in libraries could, in theory, be defended as librarians taking a more power-centric view of free speech, holding that we can—and should—be censorious on behalf of those who historically or currently have less power. But with power always comes the temptation to abuse it. Which is why the ardent opponent of censorship and defender of free speech responds to those concerns with two questions: "Who gets to decide what is censored?" and, "Who might the decider be in the future?"

A healthy democracy requires strong and trusted public purpose institutions. Universities and libraries are prominent among those, and so our actions carry extra weight in defining our collective future. When everything is seen through a political lens, including the work of such nonpartisan institutions as universities and libraries, anything those institutions do is prey for those who use politically motivated reasoning, thus quickly diminishing our institutions' authority and influence in society. Libraries, like all institutions, are easier to tear down than to rebuild—or to create anew. We should worry about the potential damage that is being done to the integrity of libraries as institutions when we apply content warnings to our collections. Because books are such powerful symbols of free expression, libraries are the foremost institution charged with upholding the values of intellectual freedom and anti-censorship that a free society associates with books. This legacy is our symbolic and cultural capital. Librarians and library users benefit every day from the profession's long-standing commitment to our core values. We jeopardize the future health of all libraries if we take actions that reflect our own failure to unambiguously stand in defense of intellectual freedom and anti-censorship.

We should worry about the potential damage that is being done to the integrity of libraries as institutions when we apply content warnings to our collections.

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Notes

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3. "Under current First Amendment jurisprudence, hate speech can only be criminalized when it directly incites imminent criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group." ALA, "Hate Speech and Hate Crime," December 12, 2017, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/hate.
4. Hate speech is a category of speech that is only not protected under the First Amendment if it is directly linked to causing imminent harm; according to the ALA, "when it directly incites imminent criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group." ALA, "Hate Speech and Hate Crime."
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